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SUBJECT: ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES IN BASRAH

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11. (U) Summary: Water supply and sanitation are the main environmental issues for both the Basrah Provincial Council and the Office of the Director General at the Ministry of Environment. Because of problems of purity, many residents purchase their water from reverse osmosis stations for drinking and cooking regardless of whether they have running water in their homes. Basrah's source of water, the Shaat al Arab River, is highly polluted with oil and sewage. There is also severe pollution from the oil industry. Decades of war have contributed to the many environmental issues in Basrah. Lack of funding and coordination among the various agencies and organizations hinders any real progress in tackling the myriad of problems. End summary.

12. (U) There are many environmental issues in Basrah including water supply and sanitation, pollution from oil, air pollution, sewage and solid waste management, military waste and pollution of the Shaat al Arab River. Basrah is located in the area formed by the combined deltas of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and contains some of the marshlands of Iraq. The draining of the marshes by the previous regime and three wars over the past 25 years have decimated the environment in what should be a relatively fertile and green area. Basrah is also home to many oil wells and a large refinery, and their pollution contributes to the environmental degradation.

WATER SUPPLY AND SANITATION

13. (SBU) Water supply and sanitation are critical issues. In a meeting with poloff on May 24, the Director General (DG) of the Ministry of Environment (MoE), Mr. Taha Yasien, stated that approximately 60 percent of the homes in Basrah city have running water. The figure drops to 35 percent in the rural areas. Mr. Yasien added that the quality of drinking water is the number one priority for his office. There are 12 large water treatment plants in Basrah Province along with a few smaller privately owned plants. However, Mr. Yasien pointed out that water going through the smaller plants is merely filtered and not treated and is therefore not fit for drinking. He said the main issue with water distribution is that the facilities and networks are in poor condition because they were built in 1948 and have not been maintained properly. Much of the water bound for residences never reaches its destination because of the large number of leaks in the network system. Another issue with the water treatment facilities is that they require electricity, and electricity is currently on for two hours and off for four hours.

14. (SBU) Many residents of Basrah purchase their drinking water from Reverse Osmosis (RO) stations. Private vendors purchase water from tankers that come from the water treatment facilities and then resell it. According to Mr. Yasien, there are supposed to be government-run RO stations that provide water for free,

but he admitted that he had not seen any in the city. Access to water is much more limited in rural areas; there are fewer RO stations and citizens must travel significant distances to purchase potable water. The average cost for 20 liters of water is less than US\$1 at RO stations. Although some residents are fortunate enough to have running water in their homes, they purchase drinking water from RO stations because water that comes from the taps is not potable.

THE SHAAT AL ARAB RIVER

15. (SBU) Basrah's source of water is the Shaat al Arab River (SAAR), which flows 120 miles from the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers to the Persian Gulf. The SAAR is extremely polluted with sewage, oil and wreckage of ships from the Iraq-Iran War. The lower portion of the river forms the border between the two countries and was the site of intense fighting during the war. Because of Basrah's ports and the oil industry, the SAAR is highly polluted with oil. According to Mr. Yasien, his office works closely with the ports to try to minimize oil pollution caused by spills and leaks in the SAAR. Mr. Yasien told poloff that a center to monitor and prevent oil pollution at the ports should be established and expressed frustration with the lack of funding to deal with the problem. The second leading cause of pollution in the SAAR is from sewage. During a meeting on May 21 with poloff, Dr. Azhar al-Sabonchi, a professor of environmental pollution at Basrah University, said that approximately 24 percent of the sewage in Basrah city is sent to a treatment facility, and the rest is dumped into the SAAR.

16. (U) The banks of the SAAR were once lined with up to 17-18 million date palms, making it the largest area of date palms in the world as well as providing an economically viable crop. Decades ago, Basrah was known for the quality of its dates. According to a Study on the Environment in Iraq conducted by United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) in 2003, 80 percent of the date palms were destroyed during the Iran-Iraq war. Since

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that time, it has been difficult to replant the crops due to increased water salinity from an upstream dam and various irrigation schemes. According to the UNEP study, the few remaining trees are susceptible to pest infestations, further degrading the quality of the forest.

OIL POLLUTION

17. (U) Basrah is home to vast petroleum reserves and an oil refinery. It is also the location of Iraq's only ports. As mentioned above, the oil industry is one of the biggest culprits for pollution in this southern province, polluting not only its main water source but also the ground and air around the wells and refineries. UN economic sanctions in recent years caused a severe shortage of parts to maintain the oil industry. According to the UNEP study, this resulted in an increased number of oil spills and leaks, and the problem worsened because of a lack of technology for leak detection and the disposal of oil-contaminated water in shallow aquifers or land.

18. (SBU) The DG from the MoE, Mr. Yasien, meets regularly with oil industry representatives to discuss pollution and possible solutions, but there is no funding available to tackle the issues. Mr. Yasien told poloff that he believes there is legislation in place to prevent pollution by the oil industry but does not know who is in charge of enforcement. During a May 30 meeting with poloff, Dr. Suknah al-Falak, member of the Basrah Provincial Council (BPC) and the Health and Environment Committee, said that the BPC sent a letter to the Ministry of Oil in early 2006 requesting that it stop polluting and take measures to prevent further pollution at the ports. To date, the BPC has not received a response to the letter.

TRASH CITY

19. (SBU) The amount of trash on the streets of Basrah is

staggering. Large mounds of trash line the sides of roads as well as immense hills of trash in empty lots. There has not been trash collection service in Basrah for over a year. Mrs. Hajar Salim Essa, also a member of the BPC and Health and Environment Committee, told poloff that there was a contract with a Kuwaiti company to clean up the trash. However, because of the security situation and the company receiving threats, it did not come to Basrah. Mrs. Hajar said that the BPC currently is seeking to award the contract to Iraqi companies. She added that BPC focus for funding projects in this sector are on water treatment and trash removal. Mr. Yasien recognized that solid waste management was a priority for the BPC, but complained that it was unable to remedy the situation because it did not have money for projects. Although burning trash is illegal, Mr. Yasien said that many citizens of Basrah do so to get rid of their refuse.

¶10. (SBU) There are no official landfills in Basrah; however, many unofficial sites have appeared all over the city. Mr. Yasien expressed concern and said that landfills are not supposed to be within city limits. Due to the inability of the local government and residents to transport their waste, all of it remains within the city. There is also no place for hospitals in Basrah to safely dispose of their hazardous waste. According to Mr. Yasien, it is merely dumped along with other waste from the hospitals. The UNEP study indicates that long-term consequences of inadequate waste systems will be acute health and safety risks associated with the accumulation of waste in heavily populated areas. The risks are exposure to disease as well as dust and debris that contain hazardous materials.

AIR POLLUTION

¶11. (SBU) Every contact poloff spoke with regarding the environment said that there was no means of measuring air quality in Basrah. All contacts believed that the air quality in Basrah had deteriorated over the past decade with the increase of automobiles in the city. In addition to the oil industry other factories such as power, fertilizer and paper contribute to air pollution. According to Mr. Yasien, residents of Basrah burning their trash, as mentioned above, greatly contributes to air pollution as well.

REMNANTS OF WAR

¶12. (SBU) Over the past 25 years, Basrah has suffered the consequences of three wars, and as a result there are large and widespread quantities of military debris, such as unexploded ordinance (UXO) and military vehicles and toxic and radioactive material such as depleted uranium. Both Dr. al-Sabonchi and Mr. Yasien expressed concern about the military debris and radioactive material that remain in Basrah. Both expressed to poloff their anxiety over the lack of monitoring of the military debris in the area. (Note: It is believed that significant

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quantities of depleted uranium were used in Basrah during the 1991 Gulf War, and it is also believed that significant quantities of UXO remain in the area as well. End note)

COMMENT

¶11. (SBU) Comment: There is very little attention being paid to the serious environmental issues facing Basrah today that could cause devastating results in the near future. With serious security problems, a high level of unemployment and political in-fighting, Basrah has not focused on its mounting environmental challenges. But pollution and other damage to the environment are a ticking time bomb that could seriously impair Basrah's future growth.

¶12. (SBU) Comment continued: In a recent meeting with the Governor of Basrah, Mohammad al-Wa'eli, he expressed frustration that the province only receives money for reconstruction and that there are no funds for environmental projects. This

sentiment was echoed by all contacts that poloff met with. Besides a lack of funding, there is little coordination among the various organizations and entities that have a stake in improving the situation. The various agencies and players all act independently from one another in trying to tackle a problem that can only be solved through a coordinated, unified, well-funded approach. End comment.
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